

Unfocused Energy: A Strategic Approach to U.S. Communications in Afghanistan

A Monograph

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Abstract

UNFOCUSED ENERGY: A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO COMMUNICATIONS IN AFGHANISTAN
by Mr. Trampes C. Crow, U.S. Department of State, 44 pages.

Over the past decade, the U.S. government struggled consistently to establish a solid foothold in the global marketplace of ideas. In the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks and through two persistent conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan the U.S. expends significant national resource toward promoting, explaining, and defending its actions to audiences of particular strategic importance to U.S. national security like the Iraqi and Afghan people. With the war in Iraq beginning to wane because of diminishing resources and a shift in national focus, the Obama administration made a redoubled commitment in late 2009 to successfully conclude the war in Afghanistan. This renewed energy in Afghanistan makes it the de facto focus of current U.S. foreign policy effort. With Afghanistan as a focus of the new administration's foreign policy, it also becomes a key front line for U.S. strategic communications efforts. Understanding and improving methods for strategic communication is a key to ultimate success in Afghanistan. The author focuses on strategic communications in Afghanistan with an eye toward understanding and improvement. Once an understanding of the U.S. strategic communications system is established, an analysis of the unique STRATCOM challenges in Afghanistan will be presented. Finally, once the two strategic communication environments are established, an analysis of current STRATCOM operations will be presented along with recommendations for improvement.

Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	1
U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION- A BRIEF HISTORY	3
CURRENT STATE OF U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS	8
U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND AFGHANISTAN	12
BUILDING A NEW STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR AFGHANISTAN.....	29
BIBLIOGRAPHY	37

INTRODUCTION

“Strategic Communication (STRATCOM) - United States Government efforts to understand and engage key audiences to create, strengthen, or preserve conditions favorable for the advancement of United States Government interests, policies, and objectives through the use of coordinated programs, plans, themes, messages, and products **synchronized with the actions of all instruments of national power.”¹**

-Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms

We live in a world of immersive communication. Mobile technology, global satellite coverage, and the internet combine to create an unprecedented level of global interconnectedness. This level of connectivity allows individuals worldwide access to new cultures, current world events, and unlimited amounts of information.²

With the war in Iraq beginning to wane because of diminishing resources and a shift in national focus, the Obama administration made a redoubled commitment in late 2009 to successfully conclude the war in Afghanistan. This renewed emphasis on Afghanistan makes it the de facto focus of current U.S. foreign policy effort. With Afghanistan as a focus of the new administration’s foreign policy, it also becomes a key front line for U.S. strategic communications efforts.

Afghanistan is a difficult target for U.S. strategic communication efforts. Its culture is markedly different than that of the U.S. and it also suffers from the effects of a turbulent living memory. With over ninety-five percent of the Afghan population under the age of sixty-five, there are deep cultural scars from the Soviet occupation of the 1980s and the Taliban rule of the

¹ JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF WASHINGTON DC. *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, (Ft. Belvoir: Defense Technical Information Center, 2009), 518.

² Robert C. Reilly, “No Substitute for Substance,” *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 17, (Fall 2009): 4.

1990s.³ As a foreign occupying power the United States finds Afghanistan a rocky conceptual landscape for strategic communication. However difficult, when facing enemies such as the Taliban and al Qaeda who are highly adept at delivering their organizational messages, crafting an effective strategic communication plan is critical for ultimate success.

Strategic communication itself is often a misunderstood notion. Because no national level definition or coordinating process for strategic communication exists, foreign policy leaders and practitioners are left to sort out strategic communications at the individual department level.⁴ For the purposes of this monograph, the term strategic communication (STRATCOM) speaks to the combined national efforts of all government agencies to affect operations at home and abroad.⁵ Within the larger umbrella of strategic communications are both public diplomacy and public affairs. The former speaks to the range of words and deeds meant to inform and persuade audiences abroad while the latter specifically addresses communications directed through various media to inform all audiences- at home and overseas.⁶

This monograph focuses on strategic communications in Afghanistan with an eye toward understanding and improvement. It will begin with a comprehensive analysis of U.S. strategic communications efforts from the early 20th century to the present. Understanding how the United States managed its image and communications apparatus is critical to divining any successful future STRACOM structure. Once an understanding of the U.S. strategic communications system is established, an analysis of the unique STRATCOM challenges in Afghanistan will be

³ CIA Fact Book- Afghanistan, accessed on line at: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/af.html> (accessed November 13, 2009).

⁴ Amy B. Zegart, *Flawed By Design: The Evolution of the CIA, JSC, and NSC* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 10.

⁵ JOINT CHIEFS OF STAFF WASHINGTON DC. *Department of Defense Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, (Ft. Belvoir: Defense Technical Information Center, 2009), 518.

⁶ Tony Blankley, Helle C. Dale and Oliver Horn, "Reforming U.S. Public Diplomacy for the 21st Century," *The Heritage Foundation Backgrounder*, November 20, 2008, www.heritagefoundation.org/Research/PublicDiplomacy/bg211.cfm (accessed December 12, 2009), 4-7.

presented. Finally, once the two strategic communication environments are established, an analysis of current STRATCOM operations will be presented along with recommendations for improvement.

Events in Afghanistan over the last eight and a half years indicate this much- long-term U.S. foreign policy toward Afghanistan is meant to be generally benign. The U.S. occupation has always been limited in scope and not designed to colonize the country or even use it as a long term base of operations along the lines of post war Germany, Japan, or Korea. The primary focus for U.S. intervention in Afghanistan is to locate and defeat terrorists who threaten U.S. national interests. Additionally, U.S. Afghanistan policy centers on eliminating actors detrimental to the Afghan populace such as the Taliban and al Qaeda while supporting human rights and self-rule. Nevertheless, these policies are perceived wholly differently by people living in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the greater Islamic World. This perception is based on a number of factors, but one primary variable is how the U.S. Government (USG) communicates its intentions and methods in Afghanistan and the region.⁷ Understanding and improving methods for strategic communication is a key to ultimate success in Afghanistan.

U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION- A BRIEF HISTORY

In a world of highly complex information systems, the United States Government currently utilizes a variety of processes and organizations to explain, promote, and promulgate its policies and values to foreign audiences. While overarching responsibility for strategic communication to foreign audiences currently belongs to two governmental offices- The Under

⁷ Christopher Paul, "Whither Strategic Communication? A Survey of Current Proposals and Recommendations," *Rand Corporation*, 2009, http://www.rand.org/pubs/occasional_papers/OP250/ (accessed March 19, 2009).

Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy and the Broadcasting Board of Governors- studying the history of USG strategic communications is also worthwhile.⁸

The USG has communicated to wide audiences since its birth from newspapers and pamphleteers up to and following the American Revolution to FDR's radio fireside chats of the early 20th century and beyond.⁹ In terms of a formal approach to streamlining and homogenizing messages for foreign audiences, two world wars and a subsequent Cold War led directly to the creation of a series of governmental organizations dedicated to government communications. During World War I, President Woodrow Wilson established the Committee on Public Information (CPI) to inform audiences abroad.¹⁰ During the rise of Nazi Germany in the mid-late 1930s, the Roosevelt administration built information mechanisms to counter Nazi propaganda being broadcast into Europe and Latin America.

Many early attempts, led by U.S. Congressman Emmanuel Celler failed owing to political concerns by the American people of escalation toward war.¹¹ Eventually, following a cultural awareness pact with Latin America and China, the State Department established the Interdepartmental Committee for Cultural and Scientific Cooperation and the Division of Cultural Cooperation. Both agencies sought ways to subtly influence in areas being threatened by encroaching Nazism.¹² During World War II, President Roosevelt established the Office of War Information (OWI). The OWI worked to provide not only information about the U.S. war effort

⁸ U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/>, (accessed October 1, 2009).

⁹ Seyom Brown, *The Faces of Power: United States Foreign Policy from Truman to Clinton*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 18.

¹⁰ Lewis L. Gould, *The Modern American Presidency*, (Lawrence, Kan: University Press of Kansas, 2004), 45.

¹¹ Michael Feldberg, *Blessings of Freedom: Chapters in American Jewish History*, (Hoboken, NJ: KTAV Publishing House in association with the American Jewish Historical Society, 2002), 243.

¹² C. A. H. Thomson, *Overseas Information Service of the United States Government*, (Washington: Brookings Institution, 1948), 161.

to Americans at home but also to foreign audiences in the war zone.¹³ One of the OWI's most successful operations involved the preparation of Western Europeans in Nazi occupied territory for the coming Allied invasion.¹⁴ At the conclusion of World War II, the clear threat of a looming Cold War with the Soviet Union led to a streamlined governmental operation for the provision of information- the United States Information Agency (USIA).¹⁵

The Eisenhower Administration created the U.S. Information Agency out of a need to bring the information fight to the front of the war of ideas with the Soviet Union. In August 1953, President Eisenhower signed Reorganization Plan No. 8 and the USIA was created. It took the primary responsibility for foreign information from the State Department and placed it under USIA. The USIA reported to the President via the National Security Council while at the same time receiving day-to-day input on foreign affairs from the Secretary of State.¹⁶ Subsequently, in October 1953, the National Committee for an Adequate U.S. Overseas Information Program met to discuss the makeup and execution of USIA programs. The Committee was made up of an all-star cast of nationally recognized members from the public relations, communications, and foreign relations communities.¹⁷

Interestingly, the committee was led by "The Father of Public Relations" Edward L. Bernays.¹⁸ Bernays made his professional career as a pioneer in the world of public relations through mass manipulation. Bernays professionally espoused the notion that in a democracy, the

¹³ Ibid, 4.

¹⁴ Allan M. Winkler, *The Politics of Propaganda: The Office of War Information, 1942-1945*. (Yale historical publications: Miscellany, 118. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), 33.

¹⁵ Wilson P. Dizard, *Inventing Public Diplomacy: The Story of the U.S. Information Agency*. (Boulder, Colo: Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2004), 87.

¹⁶ Ibid., 4.

¹⁷ Ibid., 64.

¹⁸ Larry Tye, *The Father of Spin: Edward L. Bernays & the Birth of Public Relations*. (New York: Crown Publishers, 1998), 84.

public needed outside manipulation because it was largely guided by herd mentality which he regarded as irrational and dangerous. Additionally, Bernays was the nephew of renowned psychoanalyst Sigmund Freud and often inculcated his uncle's ideas and theories into his own ideas on public relations and manipulation. Bernays also wrote what would become his seminal work in 1928-*Propaganda*. The book informed his later work including his time leading the National Committee for an Adequate U.S. Overseas Information Program.¹⁹ Bernays publicly articulated the purpose of the Committee which was to create a national information program that was "a powerful offensive and defensive weapon for our nation and vital to our national strength."²⁰

With Bernays' committee's guidance USIA launched into the 1950's with the full support of the Eisenhower administration and a clear mandate to use information as a weapon in the war of ideas. Within that environment, USIA quickly launched a series of highly successful programs across a range of media, message, and foreign audiences. From print to radio to television, the USIA used its bully pulpit in the 1950s to reach out to every corner of the globe with messages that touted democracy and the American way of life.²¹

By the 1960s, the USIA was firmly entrenched in the U.S. arsenal for fighting the Cold War. The Agency successfully bridged the gap between two vastly different presidential administrations- the Republican Eisenhower White House and the Democratic Kennedy administration. Kennedy proved his dedication to the USIA by appointing a well-respected and intensely high profile director to the head the agency- legendary newsman Edward R. Murrow.²²

¹⁹ Edward L. Bernays, *Propaganda: the Public Mind in the Making*. (New York, 1928, Kindle Edition), Loc. 2100.

²⁰ Tye, 183.

²¹ Dizard, 128.

²² Alexander Kendrick, *Prime Time: The Life of Edward R. Murrow*, (Boston: Little, Brown, 1969), 450.

Murrow moved the USIA toward a direction of open and honest communication with the wider world about the United States. The decade saw the information battle against the Soviets continue with a sharp uptick in operations in Southeast Asia in support of the Vietnam War.²³ Administratively, the USIA gained recognition followed by permanence within the government for its efforts. President Johnson fought for and won career status for Foreign Service Officers within the USIA. Johnson also utilized the USIA as a sort of social vanguard at home by expending considerable political capital to appoint Carl T. Rowan, an African American, as director in 1964.²⁴

In the 1970s, USIA undertook more aggressive measures to defeat Soviet expansionism while concurrently widening its influence within the government. Under Presidents Nixon and Ford USIA broadened operations to the Middle East and Sub-Saharan Africa.²⁵ Domestically, in 1978, President Carter placed the State Department's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs under the auspices of USIA, making it responsible for State's cultural exchange programs including the Fulbright and Humphrey Scholars.²⁶

The 1980s saw the culmination of USIA's influence and effectiveness as President Reagan sought to use USIA to finally defeat the Soviet Union in the Cold War. In that decade, USIA played a significant role in combating Soviet expansion in Africa, Central America, and Southwest Asia. Daily broadcasts to Cuba on Radio Marti began as a counter to the Castro regime.²⁷ Additionally, USIA used expanded cultural exchanges and film production to communicate U.S. interests in the Soviet Union and its satellite countries. Even in the war in

²³ Ibid., 489.

²⁴ Doris Kearns Goodwin, *Lyndon Johnson and the American Dream*. (New York: Harper & Row, 1976), 183.

²⁵ Dizard, 253.

²⁶ Ibid., 245.

²⁷ Ibid., 275.

Afghanistan against the Soviets, USIA played a key role with the Afghan Media Project which sought to educate refugee Afghanis via radio, television, and film production.²⁸

In 1999, after more than four decades of valuable service the USIA was dissolved when President Clinton signed the Foreign Affairs Reform and Restructuring Act of 1998. The restructuring resulted in the broadcast functions formerly held by USIA being absorbed by the newly created Broadcasting Board of Governors.²⁹ All other USIA functions were transferred to the newly created Under Secretary of State for Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy.

This change in structure marked a significant alteration in the way the U.S. communicated its intentions abroad. Overnight a single organization that coordinated all government efforts for strategic communications ceased to exist, leaving a vacuum for strategic communications that still exists today. Despite the best efforts of the two organizations created to replace the USIA, the net result for U.S. government agencies is a disjointed communications effort where individual departments are left to develop communications strategy on their own. The two largest and most prominent government agencies left to deal with strategic communications are the Departments of Defense and State and both agencies are still working to craft an efficient, focused communications strategy that can be successful within a whole-of-government approach.

CURRENT STATE OF U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS

To understand the state of strategic communications in the United States, it is worthwhile to define strategic communications itself. That in itself is no simple task as there are practically as many definitions of strategic communication as a concept as there are agencies in the federal

²⁸ Ellen Ray and William H. Schaap. *Covert Action: The Roots of Terrorism*. (Melbourne: Ocean, 2004), 183.

²⁹ Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*. (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 103.

government. For example, while the Department of State (DoS) holds overarching responsibility for strategic communication for the federal government, DoS also brings a specific worldview and approach to strategic communications that may differ significantly with the approach of other federal agencies.³⁰ These differences, while complicating, are a fact of federal life.

Examples of attempted coordinated strategic communications efforts within the government abound but for the purposes of this monograph, we will focus on the government's two most prominent foreign policy agencies- the Department of Defense and Department of State. The Department of Defense (DoD) has a dual role in utilizing communications strategically as both a process and a weapon. This is seen in the DoD's Office of Public Affairs (process) and Information Operations (weapon). Public Affairs in the DoD is led by the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs (OASD/PA). The OASD/PA is the public face of the Department working in an open and transparent manner to tell the story of the DoDs work to the American people and the world: "...the ASD(PA) is the principal staff advisor and assistant to the Secretary and Deputy Secretary of Defense for DoD public information, internal information, community relations, and information training...".³¹

Conversely, the other paradigmatic communications entity within the Department of Defense is Information Operations (IO). IO works to exploit communications against an enemy or set of enemies. DoD Directive S 3600.1 defines IO as:

"the integrated employment of the core capabilities of Electronic Warfare (EW), Computer Network Operations (CNO), Psychological Operations (PSYOP), Military Deception (MILDEC), and Operations Security (OPSEC), in concert with specified supporting and related capabilities to "influence, disrupt, corrupt, or usurp adversarial human and automated decision making while protecting our own".³²

³⁰ U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/>, (accessed October 12, 2009).

³¹ U.S. Department of Defense, Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs), <http://handle.dtic.mil/100.2/ADA408474>, (accessed October 12, 2009).

³² US Department of Defense (DoD). *Information Operations*. Department of Defense Directive O-3600.1. 2006.

Given the nature and depth of responsibilities inherent in the Department of Defense's mission(s), it is easy to see the continual conflicts within the department in terms of when and how to utilize strategic communications. Debates rage continually over collaboration between Public Affairs and Information Operations.³³ In 2004 under then-Joint Chiefs Chairman GEN Richard Myers, the JCS issued a directive expressly forbidding the collaboration between the two. Here, the implication is that Public Affairs must be kept free of operational entanglement in order to maintain a clear and untainted level of credibility.

Conversely, other members of the military community argued that the separation was only necessary if Information Operations expressly *lacked* credibility.³⁴ This led to a further assertion by strategic communication pragmatists that public affairs and information operations did not necessarily need to maintain such rigid and institutionalized barriers to their functions. The idea that credibility should be universal to both DoD information functions and therefore might necessitate collaboration is typified in the words of Marine Corps General James Mattis in 2006- "Integration (of PA and IO) is only a problem when you lie".³⁵ This schism within the DoD's communications hierarchy exemplifies the greater challenges found throughout the federal government when attempting to formulate strategic communications policy.

The Department of State (DoS) does not suffer from the same complications in terms of strategic communication as their counterparts in the Department of Defense. Within the DoS, the purpose of communicating strategically is fairly straightforward as the purpose of diplomacy is clear and situated squarely within the Office of Public Affairs and Public Diplomacy. That

³³ M.W. Morgan, *Planning to Influence Planning to Influence: A Commander's Guide to the PA/IO Relationship*, (2006), 8.

³⁴ Ibid. p.9

³⁵ Ibid, p.10

Office's charter lays out the following mission: "...to lead America's public diplomacy outreach, which includes communications with international audiences, cultural programming, academic grants, educational exchanges, international visitor programs, and U.S. Government efforts to confront ideological support for terrorism."³⁶

Currently, because there is no competing function within the State Department, the agency is relatively free to assess and devise a host of strategic communications policies for use internally and across the government. Such a policy was proffered by in 2007 by a Department of State Policy Coordinating Committee on Strategic Communication and Public Diplomacy.³⁷

The PCC recognized that: "all communication and public diplomacy activities should: Underscore our commitment to freedom, human rights and the dignity and equality of every human being; Reach out to those who share our ideals; Support those who struggle for freedom and democracy; and Counter those who espouse ideologies of hate and oppression."³⁸ The PCC also laid a foundation for making U.S. communications an interagency activity. Further, the PCC laid out three actionable priorities for public diplomacy- expand education and exchange programs, modernize communications, and to promote the "diplomacy of deeds".

The PCC ultimately concluded that:

"Public diplomacy is, at its core, about making America's diplomacy public and communicating America's views, values and policies in effective ways to audiences across the world. Public diplomacy promotes linkages between the American people and the rest of the world by reminding diverse populations of our common interests and values. Some of America's most effective public diplomacy is communicated not through words but through our deeds, as we invest in people through education, health care and the opportunity for greater economic and political participation. Public diplomacy also seeks to isolate and marginalize extremists and their ideology. In all these ways, public diplomacy is "waging peace," working to bring about

³⁶ U.S. Department of State, <http://www.state.gov/r/>, (accessed October 22, 2009).

³⁷ U.S. State Department, *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, (Washington, 2007), 2.

³⁸ *Ibid*, 9.

conditions that lead to a better life for people across the world and make it more difficult for extremism to take root.”³⁹

The goals of this PCC are important for future success in U.S. foreign policy. The report acknowledges the continuing struggles in coordinating strategic communication across multiple federal agencies. The PCC also makes the broader observation that communicating U.S. intentions abroad is tantamount to ultimate success in foreign policy and national security. Finally the PCCs findings are especially important in the current primary U.S. foreign policy landscape- Afghanistan

U.S. STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION AND AFGHANISTAN

Understanding strategic communications efforts between the United States and Afghanistan is imperative to the long-term success of any mission there. How the intentions and subsequent actions of the United States is interpreted and understood lays the foundation for the direction Afghanistan will take and whether or not the Afghan people will flourish or fail. In order to fully grasp the complexity involved in the U.S.- Afghan communications relationship, it is important to look at what drives and motivates each side. Recognizing the lenses and filters through which each society understands and interprets information is a key factor in making strategic communications work. Deconstructing the complexity of intercultural communications involves the analysis of a whole host of these lenses and filters. Three lenses that we will consider are the history of U.S./ Afghanistan relations to date, identity within each culture, and the symbols that each culture uses to understand and interpret information.

The history of Afghanistan is both rich and tragic. Multiple occupations by foreign powers and subsequent insurrections to end those occupations truly dominate any historical review of Afghanistan and its people. From colonial era tales by British poets and writers where

³⁹ U.S. State Department, *U.S. National Strategy for Public Diplomacy and Strategic Communication*, (Washington, 2007), 13.

a generally bleak and hostile portrait of the country permeated the Western world to the Soviet-era occupation which led to the influx of Arab-led mujhadeen fighters into the culture that remains today.⁴⁰

From colonialism and occupation grew the harsh rule of the Taliban in the late 20th century. The Taliban built a modern-day hard-line Islamist state, managing Afghanistan with its own version of shari'a law and driving the country into even deeper financial, cultural, and strategic malaise. One enduring aspect of Taliban rule has been its reliance on foreign Islamist influence for guidance and support.⁴¹ The most notable instance is the Taliban's relationship with al Qaeda. Following the terrorist attacks of 9/11 the international community was left with little choice than to target al Qaeda training camps and leadership cells and subsequently the Taliban when formulating a response.

In the eight years since the U.S. initiation of Operation Enduring Freedom in 2001, public diplomacy and overall messaging between the U.S. and Afghanistan has gone through a series of changes and evolutions. The war in Afghanistan began within thirty days of the terror attacks on New York and Washington, DC.⁴² The purpose of the United States government efforts was clear and understood. The U.S. wished to purge Afghanistan of any/all al-Qaeda elements and to further deny the organization's members operating space or safe haven.⁴³ In the words of President George W. Bush:

“This military action is a part of our campaign against terrorism, another front in a war that has already been joined through diplomacy, intelligence, the freezing of financial assets and

⁴⁰ Ibid, 8.

⁴¹ Martin Ewans, *Afghanistan: A Short History of Its People and Politics*. (New York: HarperCollins, 2002), 282.

⁴² National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States. *The 9/11 Commission Report: Final Report of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States*. (New York: Norton, 2004), 12.

⁴³ Globalsecurity.org, Operation Enduring Freedom, <http://www.globalsecurity.org/military/ops/enduring-freedom.htm> (accessed November 1, 2009).

the arrests of known terrorists by law enforcement agents in 38 countries. Given the nature and reach of our enemies, we will win this conflict by the patient accumulation of successes, by meeting a series of challenges with determination and will and purpose.”⁴⁴

The war initially met with great success and international support.⁴⁵ As the action crossed into 2002 and the Northern Alliance and Allied forces toppled the Taliban regime, the difficult job of rebuilding and governing Afghanistan began with less spectacular results. Domestically, the administration in the U.S. began to build support and direct resources toward opening a second front in the war in Iraq.⁴⁶ This created a dearth of interest and energy toward Afghanistan in comparison to Iraq and that resulted in a gradual downturn in both military and reconstruction efforts.⁴⁷

While most of the United States’ strategic communication effort was drawn toward Iraq during this period, Afghanistan began to slowly revert toward an increased drug trade, lawlessness, and an incremental return of the Taliban into localized rule.⁴⁸ Most U.S. public diplomacy was muted or lacked sufficient resource to make an adequate impact.⁴⁹ Further, as the U.S. presence became less and less visible, the Afghan people became less inclined to believe that the U.S. occupation would either end or be ultimately successful.⁵⁰ Eventually, as the Bush Administration came to a close, a change in strategy in Iraq led to greater returns in that conflict

⁴⁴ <http://middleeast.about.com/od/afghanistan/qt/me081007b.htm> (accessed November 1, 2009).

⁴⁵ Steven W. Hook, *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power*. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005), 173.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 174.

⁴⁷ Antonio Domini, Norah Niland, and Karin Wermester. *Nation-Building Unraveled?: Aid, Peace and Justice in Afghanistan*. (Bloomfield, CT: Kumarian Press, 2004), 95.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 291.

⁴⁹ *British Broadcasting Company*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/country_profiles/1162668.stm (accessed November 9, 2009).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

and a slow return to making Afghanistan work. Probably no other single event placed more focus on Afghanistan than the 2008 American presidential election.⁵¹

The election began with debate between candidates about the correct strategy for Iraq but as that conflict slowly calmed, the attention of the electoral contestants turned toward Afghanistan and the regression of progress there.⁵² During the campaign, Democratic candidates Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton, characterized Afghanistan as the main front on the War on Terror.⁵³ Concurrently, similar ideas were touted on the Republican side. As the campaign moved forward and the field narrowed to two general election candidates, the focus narrowed further on Afghanistan and the war there.⁵⁴ In the words of then Senator Obama: “The question is, was this wise? We have seen Afghanistan worsen, deteriorate. We need more troops there. We need more resources there.”⁵⁵ Upon his Obama’s election to the Presidency, Afghanistan dominated the early months of the administration and changed the face of public diplomacy with Afghanistan.

Since the 2008 election, the future of U.S. involvement in Afghanistan has been at the forefront of the Obama administration’s foreign policy agenda. In April 2009, just three months into his presidency, Obama forced the resignation of the commander of NATO forces in Afghanistan, GEN David McKiernan, and replaced him with Lieutenant General Stanley

⁵¹ *New York Times*, <http://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2010/03/19/world/international-uk-afghanistan-usa-north.html> (accessed November 9, 2009).

⁵² Commission on Presidential Debates, September 23, 2008, Presidential Debate Transcript, <http://www.debates.org/index.php?page=2008-debate-transcript> (accessed November 9, 2009).

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *New York Times*, <http://elections.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/first-presidential-debate.html>, (accessed November 9, 2009).

McChrystal.⁵⁶ Upon appointing McChrystal, Obama ordered a top down review of the mission in Afghanistan in order to formulate a new strategy and resource plan.⁵⁷ This review eventually led to President Obama authorizing a 40 percent troop increase in the Afghan theater and approving new directives for military action there. The results of this new direction are yet unknown but will ultimately decide the medium and long-term results for Afghanistan's viability in the international community.

Within the U.S. public diplomacy community, there is an ongoing battle over the nature, direction, and future of our national communication efforts. While this battle is fought on many fronts, one clear difference takes place over the role of influence in U.S. information operations. For many public diplomacy veterans, most of whom previously operated within the U.S. Information Agency system, influence is a clear and unapologetic mandate for those working within public diplomacy. Robert R. Reilly, former director of the Voice of America, states the purpose of U.S. diplomacy efforts clearly and succinctly: "the primary purpose of U.S. public diplomacy is to explain, promote, and defend American principles to audiences abroad".⁵⁸ Given the near constant confusion abroad surrounding U.S. efforts overseas by foreign populations, Reilly's definition has not been met by the strategic communications/public diplomacy apparatus currently in place.

Since the terrorist attacks of 9/11, U.S. public diplomacy works to inform more than it work to influence. During an October 2008 meeting of the Broadcasting Board of Governors, the BBG Chief of Staff Jeffrey Trimble stated that influence was "not in our mandate".⁵⁹ Trimble's

⁵⁶ *Washington Post*, May 12, 2009, <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/05/11/AR2009051101864.html> (accessed November 20, 2009).

⁵⁷ Stanley McChrystal, *COMISAF Assessment for Afghanistan*, 17.

⁵⁸ Reilly, 4.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 10.

statement is indicative of a systemic reticence within the public diplomacy community. Further proof of this reticence can be seen in the other primary public diplomacy arm within the United States government the office of the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs. Despite the fact that, by statute, the Under Secretary for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs acts as the primary coordinator for all U.S. strategic communications efforts, in the 12 years since its inception the post remained empty for over a third of that time frame.⁶⁰ This vacancy calls into question a host of managerial, policy, and strategic issues.

In terms of managing public diplomacy the near constant turbulence within the Office of the Under Secretary has shown a lack of confidence in the system as currently structured. Across three different presidential administrations, Clinton, Bush, and Obama, the position has been held consistently by a member of the advertising community or it has remained empty. Given the differences in leadership philosophy compared to the homogeneity of approach toward public diplomacy along with the constant unsatisfactory performance it is difficult not to question the management of the system as it stands.⁶¹

There seems to be little or no legislative will toward improving or even changing the public diplomacy process currently in place. In the past four years, only two bills in either house of commerce directly addressed U.S. strategic communication structure. Of the two bills both were sponsored by members of the minority party and neither reached a floor vote.⁶² Given the host of other foreign and domestic problems facing the United States Congress there is little evidence to suggest that Congress will address this inherently sticky problem. A recent call by the White House for a freeze in discretionary spending explicitly excludes the budgets of the State

⁶⁰ J. Michael Waller, "Getting Serious About Strategic Influence", *The Journal of International Security Affairs*, no. 17, (Fall 2009): 20.

⁶¹ Ibid., 21.

⁶² U.S. Congressional Record, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-3546> and <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-489>. (accessed January 2, 2010).

Department and the Department of Defense.⁶³ Nevertheless, taking on wholesale changes to a communication structure that is already riddled with misunderstanding and poor performance is a far less enticing policy target than healthcare, energy policy, or job creation. Additionally, without a coherent and maintainable strategy any changes in public diplomacy force structure could very possibly be for naught.

A general lack of strategy organizing the public diplomacy efforts of the United States, is often to blame for its continually poor performance. Former U.S. Assistant Secretary of State and current special envoy to Iraq and Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke posed this question before a Senate panel "how can a man in a cave out communicate the world's leading communications Society?".⁶⁴ This simple, straightforward query by Ambassador Holbrooke indicates the frustration often surrounding U.S. public diplomacy strategy. This frustration aimed at how the United States with all of its power and, given its benign intentions, can consistently lose to a less sophisticated more sinister enemy is at the heart of the ongoing debate.

During most of the Bush years following 9/11, U.S. public diplomacy centered on locating and highlighting common ground between the U.S. and the Arab-Islamic world. These efforts focused on basic human desires to perpetuate family life, secure peace, and find prosperity. In the words of President George W. Bush in late 2002- "There is a value system that cannot be compromised- God-given values. These aren't United States- created values. There are values of freedom and the human condition and mothers loving their children. That's very important as we articulate our foreign policy through diplomacy and military action."⁶⁵

⁶³ Jackie Calmes, "Obama to seek spending freeze to trim deficits", *The New York Times*, January 26, 2010, <http://www.nytimes.com/2010/01/26/us/politics/26budget.html> /(accessed February 1, 2010).

⁶⁴ Eytan Gilboa, "Searching for a Theory of Public Diplomacy." *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. 616. 1 (2008): 55-77.

⁶⁵ Bob Woodward, *Bush at War*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002), 130-31.

Actions behind these efforts typically took the form of traditional advertising designed to convince the audience to buy a certain good or idea. In this case the idea suggested was that the United States was not a colonial hegemonic power but instead a responsible partner in the global community.⁶⁶

One persistent strategy to accomplish this goal was to compare similarities in the Western and Islamic cultures. These messages were communicated through many different mediums.⁶⁷ Time and again U.S. public diplomacy efforts sought to convince adversaries and neutrals that U.S. culture and intentions abroad were at their nature benign and not to be feared. Over and over the public diplomacy aimed at convincing opponents that Western culture was not that far removed Arab-Islamic culture and could be trusted because of those basic similarities. These assertions of like mindedness were often delivered via means of traditional U.S. pop culture vehicles and those vehicles too often appeared to be vastly different than their Arab-Islamic counterparts. Again and again these attempts seemed to fall on deaf ears when they reached their intended audience.⁶⁸

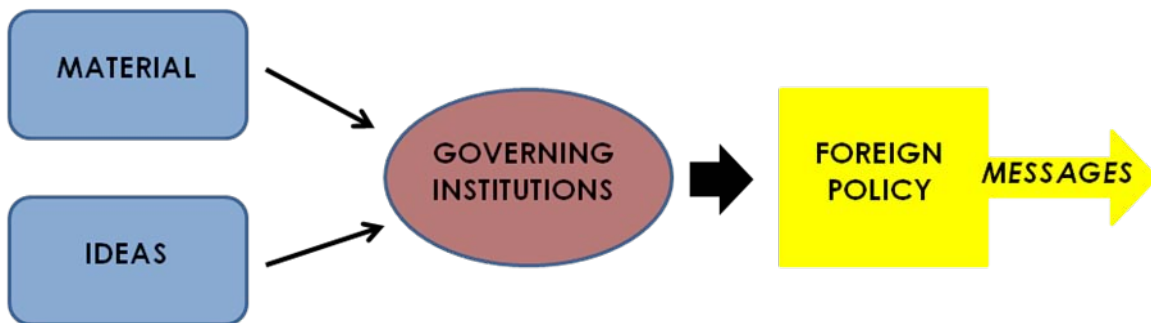
Another approach to public diplomacy in the Greater Middle East centers not on a basis of comparison but instead of contrasting the two cultures in hopes of winning some sort of value judgment not over cultures per se but over the struggle itself between those promulgating violent jihad and the U.S. Supporters of this approach advocate for a more direct public diplomacy message that seeks to undercut the Jihadist message while promoting our own. To do this we must first clearly define both and understand the processes that make them happen.

⁶⁶ Reilly, 6.

⁶⁷ George W. Bush, Message on the Observance of Ramadan, November 15, 2001, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=73471> (accessed February 1, 2010).

⁶⁸ Martin Kaplan, and Johanna Blakley. *Warners' War: Politics, Pop Culture & Propaganda in Wartime Hollywood*. (Los Angeles: Norman Lear Center Press, 2004), 157.

In order to fully appreciate the complexity and scope of creating effective message(s) for U.S. foreign policy in Afghanistan, it is necessary to understand the sources of foreign policy itself. One theory that proposes the genesis of U.S. foreign policy is argued succinctly by Steven Hook.⁶⁹ Hook describes the creation of U.S. foreign policy as two initial sets of inputs that pass through U.S. governing institutions and then result in actionable policies. The two initial inputs are material resources and ideas. These inputs originate from various institutions- Congress, The White House, and agencies such as the Departments of State, Defense, and National Intelligence. These institutions then shape the material and ideas into foreign policy. Foreign policy then is transmitted in a variety of ways- direct foreign aid, foreign military sales, traditional diplomacy and military action to name a few.⁷⁰ One aspect that acts as a continuous ribbon running through each foreign policy action is the message that the foreign policy is meant to deliver. (Fig. 1-1)



These messages are meant to convey not just the substance of the foreign policy (i.e. *what* is being done) but also the meaning behind that policy (i.e. *why* the U.S. is undertaking the

⁶⁹ Steven W. Hook, *U.S. Foreign Policy: The Paradox of World Power*. (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2005), 70.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 72.

action). Policy messages, and political messages in general, typically have finite, short term goals and these messages can change as conditions involved change.⁷¹ Policy messages are not necessarily meant to carry a deep level of cultural meaning. This provisional nature of foreign policy messages plays a significant part in strategic communication. Understanding the current model for U.S. foreign policy messaging is important but it only represents half of the equation. Also understanding differences that drive U.S. foreign audiences is key to succeeding in Afghanistan.

Recent history in Afghanistan provides a rich lens for understanding how and why messages are received by the Afghan people. While in-depth study of Afghan history over a long period certainly provides interesting insight, one need look no further than Afghanistan during the Soviet occupation forward to the present to gain an adequate understanding of the obstacles faced by U.S. foreign-policy makers in communicating in Afghanistan. The Soviet invasion of 1979 costs a series of cultural impacts still felt in Afghanistan today. The primary influence is the aforementioned institution of jihad by Afghans and fighters from throughout the Arab world. Islamic thinkers, academics, and cultural elites such as Shaikh Abdullah Azzam traveled to Afghanistan to fight against the Soviets in what was considered the one true jihad.⁷² Azzam's story portrays a classic vision of jihad in Afghanistan and its impacts on Islamic extremism worldwide. Once coined by Time magazine as "the reviver for a jihad in the 20th century" Azzam was a skilled and highly educated expert in shari'a law who was ultimately

⁷¹ Robert E. Denton, and Gary C. Woodward, *Political Communication in America*. (New York: Praeger, 1985), 8.

⁷² Walter Laqueur, *Voices of Terror: Manifestos, Writings, and Manuals of Al Qaeda, Hamas, and Other Terrorists from Around the World and Throughout the Ages*. (New York, NY: Reed Press, 2004), 421.

assassinated in 1989 in Pashawar, Pakistan.⁷³ Azzam was one of the first and most powerful Arab Islamic voices to speak out and encourage Arab Muslims and Muslims from around the world to travel to Afghanistan and engage in jihad against the Soviets.⁷⁴

The jihad in Afghanistan against the Soviet occupation became so powerful within the Islamic world that it brought with it mujahedin fighters, resources, and intense religious fervor that Afghanistan had not previously known.⁷⁵ In fact, for a time in the 1980s until the Soviet withdrawal in 1989, Afghanistan eclipsed the Palestinian territories as the primary source for executing jihad in the world.⁷⁶ In the opinion of jihadists who served in both Palestine fighting the Israelis and Afghanistan fighting the Soviets, Palestine became a primarily political struggle not one based in Islam.⁷⁷ By contrast, the fight in Afghanistan provided a more pure jihad, one that had not yet been corrupted by leadership or other outside influences seeking to take the focus off of Islam. Sheik Azzam, for example "found satisfaction of his longing and untold love to fight in the path of a law in Afghanistan. He traversed Afghanistan from north to south, east to west, in snow, through the mountains, any heat and cold, riding donkeys and on foot".⁷⁸

It is the jihad as both action and symbol that galvanized a sense of self within Afghan society while concurrently lifting the country into previously unknown strata among other cultures within the Islamic world. As Azzam once said from the pulpit "I feel that I am nine years

⁷³ Ghulan Hasnain, *Time*, 11/24/89, <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1004546,00.html> (accessed February 19, 2010).

⁷⁴ Laqueur, 421.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid.

⁷⁷ Ibid.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 422.

old: 7 1/2 years in the Afghan jihad, one a half years in the jihad in Palestine, and the rest of the years have no value".⁷⁹

Ironically, the Soviet defeat in Afghanistan, while supported by the United States, actually gave root to current difficulties in U.S. foreign policy messaging today. This is due to the perception that once one of the two infidel superpowers had been defeated the other must then be dealt with and that secondary task would prove much easier. Osama bin Laden said of the task "(The Soviet Union is) the more determined, the more ruthless, the more dangerous of the two. Dealing with a soft and pampered United States would, so it seemed, be a much easier task."⁸⁰

The religious aspect of U.S.-Afghan misunderstanding is one based in Afghan perceptions of the U.S. and the "American Way". More importantly, it is based on the idea that American culture, driven primarily by a Judeo-Christian ethic is antithetical to Islam in most cultural regards. Without question there is a perception of degeneracy of U.S. culture within Muslim societies like Afghanistan. A sense that American culture and values lack morality is rampant. An example of this perception is found in the infamous pronouncement by Ayatollah Khomeini of the United States as "The Great Satan".⁸¹ In this case the inference is made that the U.S. "is not an invader, an imperialist, or exploiter. He is a tempter, a seducer who, in the words of the Qu'ran, 'whispers in the hearts of men'".⁸² It is this impression of U.S. culture as quietly undermining force that makes effective communication exceedingly difficult when attempting to gain the current doctrinal goal of legitimacy⁸³. Attempting to gain legitimacy for U.S. or NATO

⁷⁹ Laqueur, 423.

⁸⁰ Bernard Lewis, *From Babel to Dragomans: Interpreting the Middle East*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 376.

⁸¹ Ibid., 375.

⁸² Ibid, 376.

⁸³ David H. Petraeus, and James F. Amos, *Counterinsurgency Fm 3-24*, (New York: Gardners Books, 2007), v.

efforts may be an impossible goal within a country and culture so deeply affected by religion as Afghanistan's is by Islam. This deep affectation of religion directly feeds into the overall culture.

If Islam is the fabric that Afghan culture is cut from, other cultural aspects such as ethnicity, language, and politics act as dyes that give that fabric its color. Afghanistan's ethnic diversity presents particular problems for U.S. efforts. By example U.S. forces allied with ethnic warlords out of necessity early in the conflict. These relationships with Wahdat, Dostun, and Tajik leaders led to great tactical success, driving out the Taliban and severely disrupted al Qaeda operations. It also served to hamper future relations with ethnic Pushtun.⁸⁴ This is just a small example of the cultural landmines that face U.S. policymakers as they attempt to craft, implement, and communicate foreign policy messages for Afghanistan. With a brief understanding of the cultural background that both the U.S. and Afghanistan are operating from, it is necessary to analyze tactics that have allowed each side to fail or succeed on the communications battlefield.

A successful tactic for jihadism has been to portray the United States as purveyors of injustice in the Arab-Islamic world.⁸⁵ Through keen usage of media, history, and scripture jihadist leaders like Osama bin Laden, Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, have effectively painted a portrait of the United States as invaders, colonists, and crusaders to moderate citizens in the Middle East.⁸⁶ In doing so they placed their organizations and ideologies in a position of greater influence than the United States with most foreign audiences.

Rudimentary mechanisms but extremely powerful words and ideas allowed the jihadist movement to flourish in spite of overwhelming odds in terms of resources and traditional

⁸⁴ Abdulkader H. Sinno, *Organizations at War in Afghanistan and Beyond*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2008), 271.

⁸⁵ Laqueur, 256.

⁸⁶ Ibid, 283.

methods of influence. Jihadists have utilized words and ideas conveyed through taped messages and then broadcast via television, word of mouth, and the internet to impact their intended audiences.⁸⁷ By Osama bin Laden's own estimation, "al Qaeda spent "\$500,000 on the September 11th attacks while America lost more than \$500 billion...that makes a million American dollars for every al Qaeda dollar."⁸⁸ This ability to overcome traditional advantages like unlimited resources has confounded U.S. efforts in strategic communication in the post 9-11 world and must be studied at a root ethnographic level to create an eventual solution.

To better understand the effectiveness of these messages, it is worthwhile to dissect one missive and get to the heart of its power. The following message was issued by Osama bin Laden in November 2002:

"What [US President George] Bush, the pharaoh of this age, was doing in terms of killing our sons in Iraq, and what Israel, the United States' ally, was doing in terms of bombing houses that shelter old people, women and children with US-made aircraft in Palestine were sufficient to prompt the sane among your rulers to distance themselves from this criminal gang. Do your governments not know that the White House gangsters are the biggest butchers of this age? Our kinfolk in Palestine have been slain and severely tortured for nearly a century. If we defend our people in Palestine, the world becomes agitated and allies itself against Muslims, unjustly and falsely, under the pretence of fighting terrorism."⁸⁹

Here we see multiple intentions. First bin Laden reminds the audience that the sender of the message shares a similar degree of faith and piety. Also, that piety it is not merely a way of thinking or living but also has insight beyond that of most believers- it is faith plus *insight*. Lastly, the opposite message (that the U.S.) is not merely incorrect or impious- it is unholy and in constant conflict with most Muslim beliefs. Bin Laden successfully uses his words and ideas to

⁸⁷ Pakistan Institute for Public Opinion Poll, August 2007, accessed online at <http://edition.cnn.com/2007/POLITICS/09/11/poll.pakistanis/index.html>

⁸⁸ Osama Bin Laden, and Bruce B. Lawrence. *Messages to the world: the statements of Osama Bin Laden*. (London: Verso, 2005), 242.

⁸⁹ Bin Laden, 174.

paint American policy in Israel and Palestine, and in a way that is directly contrary to the stated intentions of American leadership.

This difference in perception highlights the cultural and ethnographic influence attached to identity and symbols. Anthropological linguist Daniel Lefkowitz notes the power of cultural identity as a provisional phenomenon. The provisional nature of identity is affected by changes in society like politics, history, and war.⁹⁰ This provides some explanation for why American efforts fall flat in Afghanistan. In order to craft an effective communications strategy for Afghanistan, the U.S. must first understand what impacts Afghan identity.

Symbols serve as a powerful tool in U.S. strategic communication in Afghanistan. Theorist and philosopher Kenneth Burke describe humans as “symbol using animals” and that symbols are used and misused constantly by individuals.⁹¹ This is because the meaning of symbols, according to Lefkowitz, “differ according to the social position of speakers; are temporally dependent earlier and differently positioned meanings; and like identity, change over time.”⁹² Two commonly known examples of misunderstood symbols between the U.S. and Afghanistan are found in madrassas and the Afghan opium trade.

Madrassas carry very powerful and very different meanings in the U.S. and Afghanistan. “Madrassa” translates literally to “school” in Arabic and historically is a room attached to a mosque where young men gather to read the Koran with religious leaders.⁹³ In the past 8 years, however, madrassas became symbols of terrorist training in Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other

⁹⁰ Daniel Lefkowitz, *Words and Stones The Politics of Language and Identity in Israel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Kindle edition locs. 74-79.

⁹¹ Kenneth Burke, *Language As Symbolic Action: Essays on Life, Literature, and Method*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966), 16.

⁹² Daniel Lefkowitz, *Words and Stones The Politics of Language and Identity in Israel*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), Kindle edition locs. 96-99.

⁹³ Nicholas Schmidle *To Live or to Perish Forever: Two Tumultuous Years in Pakistan*. (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 2009) 58.

Muslim nations. Terms like “jihad university” and “dens of terror” are synonymous with madrassas in the U.S. This is in stark contrast to the symbol of madrassas in Afghanistan. In the early 1980s, madrassas served as places to train young Afghan men in methods for fighting Soviets.⁹⁴ Then, in the mid-1990s madrassa students banded together to bring order to Afghanistan in the face of widespread civil war and banditry.⁹⁵ These students went on to become what the U.S. now understands to be the Taliban. The Taliban later became a symbol of oppression in the U.S. and Afghanistan but to ignore the noble symbol the madrassas present for most Afghans is counterproductive for U.S. efforts. Since 9-11 the U.S. spent tens of millions of dollars in an attempt to reform madrassas in Afghanistan and Pakistan.⁹⁶ But in the words of Dr. Ata ur-Rahman, a former member of Parliament from the North-West Frontier of Pakistan that borders Afghanistan “Our problem is not madrassas. Our problem is clean drinking water. Our problem is sanitation. Our problem is health care.”⁹⁷ Again, we see a clear clash of symbols that creates tension in U.S. strategic communication in Afghanistan.

The drug trade in Afghanistan is another microcosm of the recurring tensions presented by differences in cultural identity. The U.S. considers Afghanistan’s opium trade a danger to U.S. national security and eradicating the opium trade is a key part of the current U.S. strategy in Afghanistan.⁹⁸ This drug trade presents itself in a number of spectacular manifestations, none of them positive. From the U.S. standpoint, it spends billions in taxpayer dollars to fight a war and

⁹⁴Ibid., 58.

⁹⁵ Ibid, 59.

⁹⁶ Ibid, 62.

⁹⁷ Ibid.

⁹⁸ Ben Arnoldy, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 12, 2010., <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0112/How-US-is-tackling-opium-trade-in-Afghanistan-poppy-heartland> (accessed March 15, 2010).

engage in reconstruction activities in Afghanistan.⁹⁹ Concurrently the U.S. government also fights a drug war on home soil. To the Afghans, however, the idea of a drug war in the American sense is literally foreign. In the U.S. the opium trade, like most illegal drug smuggling, symbolizes organized crime, addiction, and lawlessness. In Afghanistan the opium trade symbolizes agriculture.¹⁰⁰

The Karzai government looks at the drug trade with a combination of disinterest and helplessness. The elected government understands the economic boon that the poppy crop provides for Afghan farmers.¹⁰¹ From the perspective of the Taliban and other Afghan insurgents, the drug trade presents a host of opportunities. As the Taliban encourages local growers by providing them with ample buyers and protected trade routes out of the country, they strengthen “legitimate” community ties with Afghan farmers.¹⁰² In doing so, the Taliban also thumbs its collective nose at U.S. efforts in Afghanistan while also undermining the legitimacy of the government in Kabul. At the heart of the matter, everyday Afghan citizens are forced to choose between subsistence, keeping their families safe from violence, and maintaining any sort of relationship with the occupying, explicitly benevolent American force.¹⁰³

⁹⁹ Nicholas Carr, *The Atlantic Monthly*, July/August 2009, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2008/07/is-google-making-us-stupid/6868/> (accessed March 15, 2010).

¹⁰⁰ Ben Arnoldy, *The Christian Science Monitor*, January 12, 2010. accessed online at: <http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Asia-South-Central/2010/0112/How-US-is-tackling-opium-trade-in-Afghanistan-poppy-heartland> (accessed March 15, 2010)

¹⁰¹ *British Broadcasting Corporation*, http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/6965115.stm (accessed March 16, 2010)

¹⁰² Carlotta Gall, *New York Times*, September 3, 2006, <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/03/world/asia/03afghan.html> (accessed March 16, 2010)

¹⁰³ Ibid.

The result of this difference in identity and symbols has left Afghanistan as the world's largest opium supplier producing 6100 metric tons which constitutes 92% of the global supply.¹⁰⁴ The opium trade concurrently communicates the idea to the American people that neither government is capable of achieving either a single internal rebuilding goal a primary national goal. Additionally, a communications "win" is collected by the Taliban and other insurgent elements who support the drug trade.

These examples provide insight on a few of the key differences that fuel the failure of U.S. strategic communication in Afghanistan. Differences are evident in temporal understanding where U.S. political messages, designed for short term understanding, clash with an Afghan cultural memory that is more long term. Another clash is also found in identity where circumstance and history shape a markedly different worldview for Afghans than it does Americans. Finally, an inherent recognition on both sides that these differences exist, are stark, and must be considered with every communication is lacking. These shortcomings, while serious, can be ameliorated and must be to craft an adequate strategic communications policy for Afghanistan.

BUILDING A NEW STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS FRAMEWORK FOR AFGHANISTAN

Thus far we have seen that the task of communicating effectively within the Afghanistan theater is exceedingly difficult. Misunderstanding abounds, resources are expended at a high rate, and cultural differences block consistent efforts at progress. Further complicating the effort is the fact that the U.S. currently lacks a well-defined, resourced, truly strategic communications apparatus. This leads to frustration on both sides as Americans struggle with whether or not to

¹⁰⁴ Ibid.

continue the effort in Afghanistan and Afghans struggle with making it through their daily lives safely in an attempt to build a functioning state.¹⁰⁵

This analysis will provide a framework for building a strategic communications framework for the Afghanistan mission along with a menu of broad ideas aimed at streamlining American strategic communications overall. The former will address the specific needs of one current operational theater while the latter provides a structure for future American communications needs, irrespective of situation.

In terms of building a communications strategy for Afghanistan, the effort must begin and end with transparency. Transparency is a term used throughout the U.S. government to denote a sense of fairness, ethics, and trust. Transparency is a stated goal of the current administration as a contrast to the previous administration.¹⁰⁶ Transparency is a measure of a politicians' willingness to show his/her constituency their work. Taking this American virtue then transplanting and expanding it to U.S. efforts in Afghanistan is critical to ultimate success. Strategic transparency in Afghanistan should permeate all U.S. public communications efforts in Afghanistan. Strategically, making our national goals in Afghanistan clear, attainable, and communicable at every level is the primary concern. Two examples of this are "creating a secure Afghanistan to allow for the growth of the Afghan government and security forces" and "to root out and destroy al Qaeda forces operating in Afghanistan". These are examples of strategic messages that could be defined at the national level, developed at the operational level, and executed at the tactical level to the Afghan people. These messages speak to U.S. national

¹⁰⁵ Frank Newport, *Americans Tilt Against Sending More Troops to Afghanistan*, Gallup Organization, September 25, 2010, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/123188/Americans-Tilt-Against-Sending-Troops-Afghanistan.aspx> (accessed February 18, 2010).

¹⁰⁶ Jose Antonio Vargas, *Web-Savvy Obama Team Hits Unexpected Bumps*, *The Washington Post*, March 2, 2009 accessed on line at : http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/03/01/AR2009030101745_2.html (accessed February 20, 2010).

security goals and avoid inflaming Afghan fears that the U.S. maintains more sinister ambitions of usurping Afghan culture and beliefs with its own.

Operational transparency would follow along the same lines as its strategic level parent. Operational transparency focuses a significant portion of its energy on matching strategic messages to operational actions. Making U.S. physical operations, whether they are military, diplomatic, or economic, match strategic messages is critical to mid-term success in Afghanistan. An example of translating this kind of strategic message into operational strategic communication can be found in General Stanley McChrystal's COMISAF Assessment to the Secretary of Defense in June of 2009. In his Commander's Assessment, GEN McChrystal highlighted strategic communications in general as a key to future success but he went further to operationalize those ideals into actionable tasks.¹⁰⁷ An entire section of the assessment addresses minimizing civilian casualties in theater.¹⁰⁸ This excellent example of the operational linkage to strategic communication shows an understanding that operations must be compatible with strategic messages and then executable in tactical tasks.

Tactical transparency is the final peg in the Afghanistan strategic communications tent and it provides clear focus for those implementing U.S. policy on the ground. Tactical transparency is fairly straightforward and entails commanders, aid providers, and diplomats saying what they mean and acting accordingly in Afghanistan. Additionally, it means making Afghan national, provincial, and tribal leadership a critical part in decision making. Admittedly, there are times when transparency comes into direct conflict with operational and tactical security. This places great responsibility on tactical leaders to make good decisions in terms of

¹⁰⁷ Stanley McChrystal, COMISAF's Initial Assessment (redacted), document, June 26, 2009, United States Forces- Afghanistan HQ, accessed online at http://media.washingtonpost.com/wp-srv/politics/documents/Assessment_Redacted_092109.pdf (accessed January 18, 2010).

¹⁰⁸ Ibid, page E-1.

what and when to communicate in the conduct of their daily duties. Thankfully, most tactical leaders have shown an admirably high skill level when conducting strategic communications in the last decade. Much of this skill comes from deep and difficult experience in Iraq and Afghanistan but the positive effect on U.S. capability positions America for ultimate success in Afghanistan.

While transparency briefly provides a direction for strategic communication for U.S. efforts in Afghanistan, no STRATCOM effort can provide the U.S. with long-term success in effectively winning the global communications battle without significant changes in the way government conducts true strategic communication.

While a cogent and workable framework for strategic communications in Afghanistan solves the U.S.' current pressing foreign policy issue, it does little to address the systemic issue of strategic communication for the nation as a whole. Without question, concern exists throughout government about the state of strategic communications. Within the executive branch, leaders acknowledge the importance of STRATCOM and dedicate significant time, personnel, and resources to improving communications efforts.¹⁰⁹ Within the legislative branch, members of Congress caucus together in order to better assess and improve the nation's communications needs.¹¹⁰ Additionally, lawmakers consistently submit bills that address a national need for improved strategic communications infrastructure within the government.¹¹¹ Further complicating matters, a relatively "new" statutory framework for strategic communication and public diplomacy exists in the Undersecretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs

¹⁰⁹ James B. Steinberg interviewed by author, March 15, 2010.

¹¹⁰ Mac Thornberry, U.S. House of Representatives, *Establishing the Strategic Communications and Public Diplomacy Caucus*, blog, www.mountainrunner.us (accessed March 15, 2010).

¹¹¹ Mac Thornberry, U.S. House of Representatives, H.R. 489, "To Improve the Conduct of Strategic Communications by the Federal Government", January 13, 2009, http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_bills&docid=f:h489ih.txt.pdf (accessed January 15, 2010)

yet since that office's inception in 1999, it has been unable to gain an effective hold of its institutional task.¹¹²

With all of the energy directed at a national strategy for communications, what is the most effective structure for moving the United States forward in its ultimate goal of being an global player in the communications arena? Ideas abound from every corner of government that deals with strategic communications. Here are three ideas borne from research, recent U.S. experience in strategic communications and the communications environment the U.S. will operate in for the next two to three decades. These three frameworks for a comprehensive strategic communications infrastructure focus on three general solutions- a legislative solution, an executive branch solution, and an improved existing solution.

A legislative solution for improving strategic communications would come from the Congress and would proscribe a wide-reaching set of directive across government agencies. This legislation would look and feel similar to the Goldwater-Nichols Defense Reorganization Act of 1986 or the Intelligence Reform and Terrorism Prevention Act of 2004.¹¹³ This solution would provide the most comprehensive and broad-reaching choice for strategic communications. It would make law a set of communications development and direction processes that cabinet secretaries would be compelled to comply with. A legislative solution would ideally provide much needed resources for the assessment and conduct of STRATCOM while concurrently creating a cabinet-level authority for directing strategic communications efforts across the government. With time and proper staffing, a legislative approach could be the best way to achieve long-term STRATCOM success, it is not without pitfalls.

¹¹² Reilly, 4.

¹¹³ United States Senate Bill, S.2845, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-3546> (accessed February 18, 2010).

While a systemic legislative approach may seem like a STRATCOM panacea on its face, problems clearly exist. The first and most current blockage to a legislative answer is that little political will currently exists to implement a new, broad government program with an inherently amorphous purpose and little tangible benefit to the American people. Recent legislative attempts at improving federal-level STRATCOM have fallen flat with lawmakers. The aforementioned H.R. 489 submitted in 2009 gained a paltry 3 cosponsors and never left committee in the House of Representatives.¹¹⁴ Senator Sam Brownback submitted a Senate version of the bill in 2008 and it suffered a similar fate, getting stuck in committee with zero cosponsors.¹¹⁵ It is certainly not difficult to imagine lawmakers' motivations in failing to coalesce around a broad STRATCOM framework in the face of high unemployment, a crisis in healthcare, and a lagging economy but it does little for the nation's future in communicating strategically.

In addition to political obstacles, there is also the issue of Congress and its track record of legislating change within the executive branch. While examples like Goldwater-Nichols provide needed reform and improvement over the long-term, they also tend to cause significant friction in the near term due to Congress' lack of deep understanding of operations across government agencies. This friction will do little to help America in her current struggles, namely Afghanistan, and could do more to reverse recent gains there than to improve the situation. To strike a balance between a long-term statutory solution and a near-term operational solution, the government may look to crafting a solution from the executive branch.

An executive branch solution would utilize existing resources within the government to build a true national strategic communications apparatus. This option could take on a number of

¹¹⁴ U.S. House of Representatives Bill H.R. 489, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=h111-489> (accessed February 18, 2010).

¹¹⁵ U.S. Senate Bill S. 3546, <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bill.xpd?bill=s110-3546> (accessed February 18, 2010).

forms- a “STRACOM czar” appointed by the President but outside the purview of Senate approval, an Interagency Policy Coordinating Committee comprised of key members from existing agency STRATCOM infrastructure, or an independent Center for Strategic Communications built outside of government with government resources as a research and coordination body for the federal STRATCOM efforts. This Center would function something like a hybrid of the Defense Science Board and the Council on Foreign Relations. The primary benefit to an executive branch solution, irrespective of its form, would be that the plan would be crafted internally by government STRATCOM experts working in the current communications environment. Notionally, that would provide more and better current expertise to deal with ongoing operations.

Negative aspects surrounding an executive branch solution include a lack of dedicated resources, a lack of interagency control, and impermanence across changing administrations. This leaves a third option that makes use of existing legislative guidance- empowering the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

As currently designated, the Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs holds primary responsibility for America’s strategic communications efforts.¹¹⁶ While this designation is already part of U.S. law, the office has yet to achieve the desired effect. This is due to a consistent lack of resources, a lack of clear directive authority, and a perceived dearth of confidence in the political appointees selected to hold the position over the last 11 years. In order to remedy these nagging issues, the office must be fully funded and provided with more directive authority over existing STRATCOM structures across the government. Additionally, a fundamental discussion across the federal STRATCOM community should be undertaken in order to divine the nature of future STRATCOM endeavors and from there choices can be made

¹¹⁶ U.S. Department of State, www.state.gov/r/ (accessed March 18, 2010).

at the White House in terms of the type of professional best-suited to lead national efforts as Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs.

Accomplishing these key improvements within the existing Under Secretary of State for Public Diplomacy and Public Affairs structure holds particular hope in the current operating environment thanks to the commitment to the whole of government approach within the Obama administration. The current Secretaries of State and Defense along with the National Security Advisor all share a uniquely beneficial working relationship.¹¹⁷ As key voices in the nation's primary agencies for strategic communications, the Department of State, Department of Defense, and the White House, should they agree to empower the Under Secretary, that office could accomplish a considerable amount of good.

Without question, strategic communications can facilitate the future of U.S. foreign policy. As the remaining superpower, America shares both national interest and international responsibility for maintaining peace, fostering stability, and promoting development across the globe. In a world of truly global, instantaneous communication how the U.S. communicates its intentions, ideas, and actions is critical. Without a well defined and executed strategy, our enemies will consistently maintain a crucial advantage as the U.S. operates overseas. The realization of this challenge resonates throughout the halls of government in Washington and beyond. If executed correctly, Afghanistan provides an excellent proving ground for America's future STRATCOM efforts. Afghanistan represents a true whole of government operation with serious consequences for our national security. By studying history and culture then processing that information through a truly national communications strategy, America creates its best opportunity for success in Afghanistan and beyond.

¹¹⁷ David Rothkopf, "It's 3a.m., do you know where Hillary Clinton is?", *The Washington Post*, August 23, 2009.

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